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Hannah More, the Conventionalist, and Mary Robinson, the Radical: Differing Feminist Perspectives on 19th Century Women's Progress, Purity, and Power

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Abstract

During the Romantic literary period, British feminist writers assumed drastically different stances when advocating for female empowerment and autonomy. Hannah More and Mary Robinson demonstrate these different feminist approaches in their writing, as More advocates for women's spiritual purity as a means of attaining social equality, while Robinson endorses an assertion of female intellectual capacities. Through their distinct feminist polemics, More and Robinson expose how both an allegiance to and a rejection of traditional gender conventions can function as mechanisms for female social mobility and gender equality. This study explores the differences between More's feminist ideas in her poem "The Story of Sinful Sally. Told by Herself" and Robinson's *A Letter to the Women of England*. This paper also discusses the implications of these women's opposing feminist philosophies in contemporary western culture and the ways in which their views can be reconciled through their

application to modern female social scripts.

In reaction to British societal conditions, the Romantic literary period introduced a universal rights discourse, which included debates over the rights of blacks, children, workers, and women. In this advocacy of collective human rights, Romantic literature marked an inclusion of female authorship in the literary marketplace. With this inclusion, Romanticism revolutionized the concept of “revolution” by feminizing it and empowering the female voice. Women writers articulated their opposition to the andocentrism and misogyny of England's prevailing ideology. However, the approaches that various female writers took when articulating their objections to British society drastically differed, as some writers advocated for more extreme measures of social reform than others. Despite their common objective to promote female autonomy, Hannah More and Mary Robinson epitomize the variation within this movement, as they strongly differed in their outlooks on the extent to and manner in which women should assert their equality.

Hannah More was born in Gloucestershire, England in 1745. As a writer and philanthropist, More devoted much of her work to preserving Evangelical piety, particularly by guiding young women through their moral choices (“British Views”). As one critic describes, More's writings promote “pedagogy, philanthropy, and purification as ...cures for the old order's social ills” (Mellor and Matlak 202). In this way, More demonstrates an understanding of the need for social reform, particularly with respect to women's issues. Specifically, More's work emphasizes an importance for the women of her time to function as social agents, rather than objects (Mellor). According to Anne K. Mellor, More suggests that in order for women to make this social transition, British society must expand the feminine sphere and female social power within the framework of Christian duty and self-improvement. For More, women's empowerment in a reformed British society relied on their adherence to social conventions and preservation of female purity.

Mary Robinson's works, however, advocate a reevaluation and overturning of the moral codes to which 19th century women were subjected. Robinson, born in 1758, was More's contemporary and even attended a school taught by Hannah More's sisters (Ockerbloom). In much of her writing, Robinson also promotes methods for female social advancement. However, she contends that women should assert their power as sexual and intellectual beings rather than subscribe to social scripts of feminine morality which render them passive and defenseless (Rooney). In other words, as More championed spiritual purity and an adherence to moral conventions as means of female progress, Robinson criticized such notions as actually promoting female passivity and immobility.

More's poem “The Story of Sinful Sally. Told by Herself.,” published in her *Cheap Repository* in 1796 and Robinson's 1799 *A Letter to the Women of*

England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination exemplify these two female writers' views on female societal empowerment (Wu, Ockerbloom). More aimed "The Story of Sinful Sally" at the literate members of England's lower classes. For More the poem was a means to provide these individuals with "morally edifying reading materials" (Shiner). In this way, the poem epitomizes More's views on advancing female social mobility via Christian piety. Contrarily, Robinson's letter, addressed to her female contemporaries and written as response "to the rampant anti-feminist sentiment of the late 1790s," encourages to women discard the "glittering shackles" of British moral tradition to assert themselves as the equals of men (Seltzer, Robinson pp. 93). Consequently, a comparison of these two works, despite their differing forms, demonstrates the drastic distinction between More and Robinson's views on reforming the societal conditions of 19th century British women.

"The Story of Sinful Sally" establishes More's contention that female progress relies on women's submission to the moral codes prescribed by her society. In fact, "The Story of Sinful Sally" serves as a warning to women regarding their vulnerability to male seduction and moral corruption. The poem implies that if women are responsible for managing their vulnerability to temptation, they can achieve self-improvement and enable their social mobility. Furthermore, in its construction of female sexual identity, "The Story of Sinful Sally" promotes conceptions of femininity that locate a woman's personal worth in her bodily virginity and depict the "fallen woman's" earthly existence as irremediably corrupt. In this way, More polarizes female purity, such that a woman is either pure or impure. Consequently, More's poem suggests that complete corporal virtue and moral obedience are necessary means for women to reach spiritual transcendence and enable social progress.

In *A Letter to the Women of England*, Mary Robinson echoes several of More's general contentions; however, she drastically differs from More in that she promotes women's release from social convention. For example, like More, Robinson advocates for an assertion of female responsibility in order to establish female prowess as social agents in British society. However, Robinson necessitates female responsibility with respect to women's self-authorship and self-empowerment. Robinson's *Letter* proposes that it is women's responsibility to actively reject, rather than abide by British moral codes. The letter also contradicts the way in which More constructs female identity in "The Story of Sinful Sally." That is, Robinson's *Letter* supports an escape from her society's bodily understanding of women and grounds feminine identity in women's intellectual capacities. Robinson also opposes bifurcation of female morality along the lines of pure and impure, an ideology More's poem seems to uphold. Robinson emphasizes the injustice of such polarized moral judgments about female behavior by comparing them to the lenient ethical standards to which men are held. In this way, Robinson's *Letter* advances more extreme ideas of female social mobility than does More's "The Story of Sinful Sally," as *Letter* rejects fundamental tenets of her society's construction of the female sex, particularly their passivity, bodily identification, and moral polarization.

In "The Story of Sinful Sally," More warns women of their vulnerability to male seduction and suggests that females must be responsible for insuring their moral purity. More successfully constructs the poem as a warning to the female sex by designating Sally, a prostitute, as the poem's narrator. In telling her story, Sally implores the women of her era to consider and adjust their behavior in light of her experiences. Thus, Sally becomes an extension or synecdochic representation of 19th century women. In order to represent female vulnerability to moral corruption, More depicts Sally as "falling" from an idealized state of innocence and naiveté. For example, Sally describes herself as once "cheerful," "honest," and "simple" (7, 18, 16). She also recalls the closeness of her relationship with her parents (19). This portrayal of Sally's pastoral life, prior to being seduced by Sir William, endorses the prevalent notion that women possess an innate innocence which, if upheld, facilitates a "peaceful" and "blessed" life (24, 32). Furthermore, the poem's rhyme scheme and form reinforce this idea of women's original purity and consequent vulnerability to corruption. More's use of quatrains with alternating rhymes lends a childish innocence to the poem, as it seems reminiscent of a nursery-rhyme. The rhymes also typically incorporate simple and monosyllabic words, such as "ear/...hear," "lass/...pass," and "sing/..swing" (33, 36, 81, 83, 126, and 128). By employing this simple structure and rhyme scheme, More causes the poem's reading to seem effortless and juvenile. This effect underpins Sally's initial innocence and fortifies More's contention that women are in a position of vulnerability because they can ruin their natural state of purity and innocence by falling prey to moral corruption.

More further links women's virtuousness with their potential vulnerability to moral desecration by incorporating metaphors and puns conveying both childish innocence and spiritual contamination. For example, Sally uses the metaphors "the child of hell" and "some...imp of hell" when describing herself after being seduced by Sir William and becoming a prostitute (64, 100). More relies on these metaphors to juxtapose an image of childhood with the notion of damnation. In doing so, Sally appears to be intrinsically good, but spiritually sullied by Sir William's seduction. More also demonstrates the way in which Sally's innocence relates to her ultimate moral demise as Sally recollects: "[w]hen Sir William met me skipping,/ [a]nd he spoke me on the Green" (43, 44). Here, Sally's description of herself "skipping" on the "Green" reinforces an image of her naivety, as skipping is typically a childish activity and the term "[g]reen," particularly when capitalized, represents a transcendent or idealized innocence. Furthermore, this statement can be understood as Sally naively recalling that Sir William verbally "*spoke*" to her on the hill. However, it can also be viewed as Sally's recollection of William sexually penetrating or "*spoking*" her. Thus, the ambiguity of this pun relays a double meaning, linking Sally's innocence with her disgrace. By first establishing women's original purity and then connecting this innocence to their potential for moral corruption, More exposes female vulnerability to spiritual disgrace.

More contends that women must be aware of this vulnerability and resist the

potential for their moral defilement. She expresses this contention through Sally's plea to "each maiden" to hear her plight (1). In doing so, More proposes that the female sex, as a whole, faces a responsibility for upholding their purity and resisting men's wiles. However, in "The Story of Sinful Sally," this responsibility requires that women abide by the social scripts of feminine morality dictated by 19th century British society. For example, Sally recalls that as a young girl she would "stray" from her home and walk through the meadows and among the willows (16). Consequently, Sally is characterized as walking out alone in nature and "stray[ing]" from the domestic sphere. Thus, her abandonment of domesticity and distaff for nature-walks seems to foreshadow her imminent "fall." Furthermore, Sally states that "had [she] kept from sinning" she would have "soon proved a wife" (31, 30). Here, More promotes her society's enforcement of extramarital female purity. She also imposes the moral convention that women should marry. In doing so, More implies that it is socially maladaptive for women to "stray" from conventional doctrines of female morality (16). More also uses more masculine characterizations to describe Sally's behavior after her seduction. For instance, Sally describes how she became an active agent and "leader" in her morally depraved social circle. Sally explains that she began training young boys to steal and kill (117-120). In doing so, Sally seems to assume a stereotypically masculine role, as she acted as an authority figure and director among her group. However, Sally then details how she would watch these young boys "swing" from the gallows and callously relish in her freedom (121-124). Thus, More seems to suggest that as Sally abandons codes of feminine behavior and assumes a more masculine social position, she grows increasingly malicious and immoral. More also represents the importance of complying with established conventions by adhering to her own poetic conventions within the context of her writing "The Story of Sinful Sally." For instance, the poem uses an extremely regular meter and rhyme scheme and recurrently incorporates anaphora and repetition to literally conventionalize the poem. By using metrical regularity and anaphoric repetition of words like "[w]here," "[t]hen," and "[c]ome," More sets an example for females of an adaptive and positive behavior through her adherence to the conventions of the poem. Therefore, "The Story of Sinful Sally" constructs women as responsible for adhering to 19th century moral conventions and implies that by complying with these codes, women can achieve the self-improvement and spiritual decency needed to attain societal progress.

Like More, Mary Robinson also encourages women to assume responsibility for establishing their equality and agency in Britain's patriarchal society. However, in *A Letter to the Women of England*, Robinson presents this as a female responsibility to achieving empowerment via self-authorship and the repudiation of social and moral conventions. Robinson claims that women must reject notions of their "vulnerability" and "seductability," as such social scripts perpetuate images of female defenselessness. She also attends to the way in which her society conceptualizes male and female agency with respect to human error. Robinson suggests that societal conventions represent men as erring "voluntarily," while they depict women as being "seduced" (pp. 77). She

argues that these social understandings of human error remove agency and responsibility from women, and consequently, “woman is destined to be the passive creature” (pp. 78). That is to say, by constructing women as subject to male voluntary actions, society sees females as the “weaker” and more tempted sex (pp. 81). This critique of society's views on female vulnerability rejects More's warning to women regarding their temptability as upholding a myth of feminine passivity. In an attempt to challenge this myth, Robinson suggests the women's true responsibility lies in their self-authorship and articulation, and rejection of 19th century social codes.

Robinson claims that women have historically been denied the privilege and power of “self-defense” (pp. 73). Thus, it is their responsibility to claim their long-overdue self-defenses. In *Letter*, Robinson presents feminine self-authorship, especially in the form of literal authorship and the redefinition of female sex-roles, as strategies for challenging misogyny. Robinson suggests that women should utilize their authorial capacities not only by writing against the “tenets of bigotry” but also by rewriting or authoring new social scripts of femininity (pp. 94). For example, in her closing appeal, Robinson advises women to “let [their] daughters be liberally, classically, philosophically, and usefully educated; let them speak and write their opinions freely” (pp. 94). She then concludes the letter with a list of “enlightened British women” writers to whom “posterity [should be] indebted” for their literary contributions (pp. 95). Robinson also contends that “the best novels that have been written, since those of Smollet, Richardson, and Fielding, have been produced by women” (pp. 95). Here, Robinson clearly urges women to write and utilize their thoughts and voices to demand equality and secure social empowerment.

Robinson also qualifies her list of female writers by contending that “their pages have not only been embellished with the interesting events of domestic life, portrayed with all the elegance of phraseology and all the refinement of sentiment, but with forcible and eloquent, political, theological, and philosophical reasoning” (pp. 95). Here, Robinson presents authorship as not only articulating women's views on social change but actually enacting that social change by allowing women to establish their intellectual abilities in the face of societal conventions which construct them as irrational (pp. 95). Moreover, Robinson states that since women “have successfully taken up the pen, and their writings exemplify both energy of mind, and capability of acquiring the most extensive knowledge,” British women are rising to “immortal celebrity” (pp. 91). In this way, writing is a venue for women to demonstrate the range of their creative, philosophical, and intellectual abilities and redefine themselves as “rational creatures” (pp. 94). Therefore, Robinson suggests that women are responsible for actively rejecting the social roles to which they have been subjected, as the wife should refrain from being “the passive, the obedient slave” of her husband (pp. 3). Robinson also claims that women must work to relocate the feminine identity in their intellectual capacities rather than their bodily purity. In *Letter*, Robinson asserts that men have conveniently constructed the feminine identity in terms of a woman's corporeal state. Doing

so, allows men to “idolize [a woman's] personal attractions, as long as they influence [male] senses” and construe a woman's value based on her virginity (pp. 85). In this way, when a woman's physical attractions “begin to pall” or she is no longer chaste, “prejudice is ever eager to condemn what passion has degraded” (pp. 85). Thus, men are able to perpetually subordinate women by locating their value as individuals within their physical statuses and deemphasizing the capacities of the female mind. In reaction, Robinson claims that women should “adapt their studies to their strength of intellect...[and] expand their minds” (pp. 94). She recommends that females should teach their daughters “to feel their mental equality with their imperious rulers” (pp. 94). Robinson believes that by “the expansion of intellect” women will redefine the identity of their sex and consequently their roles in society. She contends that women are “capable of mental energies, and worthy of the most unbounded confidence” (pp. 92). In fact, she believes that males find female education threatening because intellectual liberty and ability will allow women access to a layer of their being which could release females from submission (pp. 84). Therefore, by establishing a system of mental equality, British women will break from their corporeal identity and use their intellectual capacities to assert societal power and equality (pp. 92).

As Robinson rejects her society's emphasis on a women's physicality, More centers Sally's identity on her physical virginity in “The Story of Sinful Sally.” This conception of femininity defines Sally and determines her value as an individual by her physicality. For example, in “The Story of Sinful Sally,” Sally becomes “ruined” because she is seduced by Sir William on the hill (6, 164). In this way, More centers Sally's identity, including her spirituality and integrity, in her physical virginity. Furthermore, More emphasizes that a woman's concern with physical appearances and material goods is inextricably bound to her moral ruin. For example, prior to being seduced by Sir William, Sally describes that she tripped through the meadow “vainly wishing to be seen” (41, 42). Furthermore, Sally explains that Sir William gave her “presents” and “bedecked [her] in ribbons” (49, 50). Therefore, despite Sally's descriptions of her initial innocence, Sally also portrays herself as vain and materialistic. This portrayal serves to emphasize the way in which a woman's bodily self is tied to her moral worth, as Sally seems to be warning women not to care too much for their appearances or for material possessions.

More further locates a woman's identity in her bodily existence by focusing several stanzas on the physical consequences of Sally's lost innocence. In doing so, More not only stresses the significance of Sally's corporal debauchery, but highlights the bodily ramifications of this disgraced physical state. For instance, after explaining her “ruin,” Sally states that she lived in London “powdered well, and puffed, and painted” (73). Sally describes that she would “glitter” and “dress...for the play” (77, 78). In these lines, More condemns Sally's physical vanity and sexual provocativeness, presenting them as the results of her “unholy” bodily state. Therefore, the importance of a woman's physicality seems to be re-emphasized in “The Story of Sinful Sally,” as Sally's

bodily ruination leads to additional physical depravity. Moreover, as Sally describes herself as having “skin so white” and a “heart so tainted,” she advances the 19th century societal connection between female physicality and female integrity (73). The parallel structure of this line conveys the notion that a woman's bodily state parallels and reflects the moral decency of her character. Furthermore, even the poem's title, “The Story of Sinful Sally,” presents her sinfulness as an eternal quality of her character. Thus, “The Story of Sinful Sally” demonstrates the way in which 19th century constructions of feminine identity locate a woman's value and integrity within the state of her bodily purity.

In addition to rejecting these physical constructions of feminine identity, ideas that More's poem seems to uphold, Robinson also opposes her society's bifurcation of female morality, which renders women as either entirely morally virtuous or permanently and irredeemably corrupt. Robinson exposes the injustice of British society's extreme polarization of female morality, which unfairly constructs a woman's virtue as either entirely good or hopelessly ruined. Robinson contends that “if a woman advance beyond the boundaries of decorum, [r]uin ensues, reproach, and endless shame,/[a]nd one false step, entirely damns her fame” (pp. 6). She then claims that if a woman is morally “wounded,- - she is lost for ever!” (pp. 7). Here, Robinson asserts that females are unfairly subjected to a system of moral standards that defines them as either honorable or dishonorable; and, when they breach the borders of honor, even ever so slightly, they are permanently ruined.

Robinson underscores the prejudice of her society's system of female morality by claiming that men are not subjected to this same dichotomized ethical structure. She states that “[i]f a man receive an insult, he is justified in seeking retribution. He may chastise, challenge, and even destroy his adversary” (pp. 5). Yet, if a woman were to take similar actions, “she would be deemed a murderess” (pp. 5). Robinson similarly highlights the injustice of her society's moral codes as she informs her fellow women:

[C]ustom says, you must be free from error;
 you must possess an unsullied fame: yet, if a
 slanderer, or a libertine, even by the most
 unpardonable falsehoods, deprive you of
 either reputation or repose, you have no
 remedy. He is received in the most fastidious
 societies, in the cabinets of nobles, at the
 toilettes of coquets and prudes, while you
 must bear your load of obloquy, and sink
 beneath the uniting efforts of calumny,
 ridicule, and malevolence (pp. 5 and 6).

Here, Robinson contends that as women face dichotomous moral codes and inflexible social judgments, males enjoy the luxury of a moral continuum and lenient social forgiveness for their transgressions. Furthermore, More

explains that women are expected to remain chaste and faithful, while men, the “law breakers” and “sacrilegious oath takers,” are permitted to consider marriage, “the most sacred of ceremonies as merely a political institution” (pp. 75). She also contends that even “villain[s]” who “destroy” women are pardoned, while their female victims are socially relegated to eternal damnation (pp. 8). Thus, Robinson’s letter opposes 19th century Britain’s prejudiced polarization of female moral codes, highlighting how men and women must adhere to entirely different standards of behavior and unfairly experience drastically distinct social reactions to their moral transgressions.

“The Story of Sinful Sally” demonstrates this dichotomization of female morality criticized in Robinson’s letter, as Sally’s sullied status causes her to become hopelessly and irreversibly defiled. More continually uses images of ruination to represent the permanence of Sally’s moral depravity. For example, in the poem’s second stanza, Sally describes herself as “ruined now” (6). She also contends that she is “sinking down” or “plung[ing]” into a state “so lost and so forsaken” (94, 110, 95). Here, Sally describes her fall with the repetition of “so,” which conveys the extent to which she has been rendered irreversibly damaged. Furthermore, Sally states that her “fallen” lifestyle as a prostitute has subjected her to “damnation.../[a]nd a never-dying flame” (87-88). This description is presumably a reference to the flames of hell and the eternal torture which Sally fears she will undergo. Though Sally understands that her immoral behavior could conceivably sentence her to eternal damnation, she maintains “a ray of hope” that she will not perish in hell (163). Perhaps, More is suggesting that though “fallen” women can never regain moral integrity on earth, they must maintain faith in God’s forgiveness and in the notion of Christian redemption. In this way, More dichotomizes female morality along the lines of pure and impure; however, she does so only with respect to women’s earthly existences, as she maintains a “ray” of optimism for the spiritual salvation of “fallen” women in the afterlife.

More also suggests that once a woman loses her virginity outside of marriage and “plunges” into a state of sin, she automatically becomes increasingly vicious and masculine (110). For instance, Sally describes herself, after being seduced by Sir William, as a woman who retired her bible in order to read “filthy novel[s]” and whose conscience failed to prevent her from drowning her sorrows in gin (68, 111, 112). She also characterizes herself as a “cruel spider stretch[ing] wide his web for every fly” as “each victim that he catches/straight he poisons till he dies” (105-108). Moreover, Sally portrays herself as a “beast of prey,” and the “vilest” of “ruffian rogues” (116, 114). By describing herself as a male spider, a beast, and a ruffian rogue, and noting her drinking and sinful habits, Sally again seems to characterize herself by using more masculine imagery. In this way, More represents Sally’s seduction as triggering a degenerative process through which Sally further loses her femininity and destroys her moral integrity completely.

More’s poem additionally conveys the certainty of Sally’s downfall through

the physical effects of her immoral behaviors, which reinforce More's linkage of a woman's bodily state with her moral integrity. That is, Sally contracts Syphilis and eventually dies, as her face becomes "spotted" and her flesh "rotted" (137, 139). Thus, More represents Sally's immoral behavior as unavoidably instigating both her physical demise and her moral corruption. These examples demonstrate the social understanding of female morality which "draws a line" between women who are virtuous and those who are not. It also presents More's suggestion that women can neither reinstate or recover their physical virginity, nor amend or repair their moral corruption during life.

Furthermore, More demonstrates and promotes the ways in which 19th century British society subjected men and women to entirely different standards of moral behavior. The poem's description of Sir William exemplifies this prejudice, particularly in light of the previously discussed moral judgments surrounding Sally's behaviors in the poem. For example, as Sally establishes her "blame" for being seduced by Sir William and characterizes herself as a "child of hell," she portrays William in a less negative light. In fact, she merely exclaims: "[o]h how crafty was his way!" (52). The adjective "crafty" has both negative and positive connotations, as an individual who is "crafty" can be understood as intelligent and skillful (52). Therefore, as Sally rebukes and subjects herself to severe moral criticism, she seems to simply admonish Sir William, who should in theory be equally blameworthy, for being "crafty" (52). In this way, "The Story of Sinful Sally" epitomizes the gender-biased moral standards of 19th century Britain and the ways in which men were exempted from the polarized moral ideals which women experienced.

This investigation of "The Story of Sinful Sally" and *A Letter to the Women of England* exposes the ways in which Hannah More and Mary Robinson drastically differ in their polemics on female social advancement in 19th century Britain. Based on this analysis, Robinson would conceivably criticize More's conceptions of female progress. That is to say, as More advocates for women's adherence to Britain's prescribed social scripts and moral codes of femininity, Robinson articulates the importance of rejecting such societal constructions as restrictive and unfair. Thus, Robinson appears to champion a more radical social reform, in which unconventionality is endorsed rather than discouraged. In a society where women are educationally and professionally "liberated," yet still expected to become mothers and homemakers, it appears that today's Western world has attempted to reconcile the distinct perspectives presented by More and Robinson on how women can attain societal empowerment by combining them. For example, modern conceptions of female roles include archetypes like "the working mom." Such a model for female behavior seems to amalgamate the ideals of both More and Robinson in that a "working mother" appears both empowered and domestic. However, the social benefit that such an amalgamation has granted women is debatable, as perhaps, these models put further pressure on women to conform to a potentially more demanding blueprint of expected feminine behavior. That is, contemporary women may be experiencing even more pressure to conform to society's expectations, as they

have to be both financially independent and domestically involved. Perhaps, society awaits further reform of sex roles and behavioral scripts, which promote a new wave of suggestions for female empowerment and liberation from the codes to which the gender is currently subjected.

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